WHAT DOES HE WANT?
Revelation 3:14-20
September 15, 1974

Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio
John McCormick Buchanan

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him." Every time I hear that my memory transports me to childhood: to Bible School. We sang a pretty catchy song about that verse but what I really liked was a flannel-graph, visual-aide that showed a large red heart with a door on it and Jesus knocking. It appealed to my need to have things graphically explained. We were made to understand very clearly that Jesus wanted to come into our hearts, and although we were never exactly sure why, we knew it had to do with getting to heaven.

That same idea is expressed in Holman Hunt's very popular painting that portrays Jesus at night, lantern held in his hand, knocking gently on the door of a rustic cottage. The favorite old hymn says the same thing;

"O Jesus, thou art standing
Outside the fast-closed door,
In lonely patience waiting
To pass the threshold o'er.
O Jesus, thou art pleading
In accents meek and low."

It is a very attractive idea: a most winsome sentiment: the lonely Savior seeking access to human hearts. Unfortunately, it has very little to do with the New Testament. As is often the case, the images we attach to the words are more the product of American pietism - or what we fondly call "old time religion" than the result of honest Biblical study. The flannel graph heart; the popular painting; the hymn; simply do not do full justice to the text from which they received their original inspiration.

Let's look more carefully. The text in question - "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" comes from the book of Revelation, easily the most perplexing and difficult document in the Biblical canon. It was written by an exiled political prisoner by the name of John. Because he was an articulate Christian, the Roman political establishment banished him to exile on the lonely island of Patmos, apparently a penal colony. They probably should have executed him because from exile he wrote a frankly political polemic against his captors - which we know as the Book of Revelation. In order to protect himself and the early Christian communities he employed wild imagery and secret symbolism - the Christians understood it: the Romans did not. Ever since, of course, Christians have been trying to squeeze their own political biases into John's symbolism. At various times in my life I've been told that the seven-headed beast in the 13th chapter of Revelation was really Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Nikita Kruschev, and Mao Tse Tung. It was even hinted in the 30's that the apocalyptic vision was fulfilled in the person of F.D.R. and New Deal.

In any case, John of Patmos began his book by using the very dramatic image of Christ himself dictating letters to the seven Christian churches located in Asia Minor. In the prologue to the letters he describes his vision of Christ: "a son of man, clothed with a long robe, a golden girdle round his breast, his head and hair were white, his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace...from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength." (1:13-16)

John adds the comment that when he saw this vision he fell at his feet as though dead. And reading the description we do not wonder why. The point is, that this is not exactly the image that comes to my mind when I hear the familiar verse about Jesus knocking at the door. My image is a little more serene. But the Biblical text becomes even more upsetting.

Addressing the church at Laodicea, in Chapter 3, he says, "I know your works: You are neither hot nor cold. Would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth...Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten."

And then - after all that - "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me." On second thought, it's no wonder that I didn't get the whole picture in Bible school. That's pretty strong medicine.

But let's pursue it a bit by filling in a little more of the background. The issue in the Laodicean church was the same issue that got John of Patmos in hot water in the first place: namely Roman insistance that its subjects acknowledge the divinity of the emperor - beginning with Augustus; a simple matter of patriotism. The Christians could not do it and their refusal was regarded as treasonous civil disobedience. It appears that the people of Laodicea were trying to play it both ways; trying desperately to remain neutral. Their lukewarmness, which was so offensive to John of Patmos, was precisely in their refusal to be what they claimed to be - followers of Jesus Christ: to take a controversial stand regardless of the risk to security and well-being.

Three preliminary conclusions may be drawn at this point. The words - "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." are addressed to individuals - but also to a church, a Christian community; second, it is not a mild plea to open one's heart in order to be saved so much as an urgent demand to be honest about one's commitment. Third, my impression of it all, if we must visualize it - is not of a mild and gentle Jesus tapping on the door in the quiet of night, "in accents meek and low", but of a potent, insistant Lord pounding on the door in broad daylight.

That, I would suggest, is a little more consistent with what's happening in the New Testament than the tepid image of artists and hymn writers. Jesus Christ wants in - but he has something more in mind than a private sense of salvation. He demands to be taken seriously in the world by those who call him Lord.

We have come a long way from that understanding. There is today a tragic and debilitating division across Christendom, within denominations and within congregations between what may be called, for the sake of discussion, the pietists and the social activists. Pietists are the people who see the purpose of Christian Faith as the saving of souls. Jesus is regarded as the Savior who seeks admission to human hearts through conversion. The desired result is a personal sense of salvation. When it stops here, and too frequently it does, the position if only half-true. Unfortunately, people who take this position usually know more about the Bible than anyone else, and are able to overwhelm the average skeptic with proof texts. They claim, and a lot of people agree, that their position is Biblical Christianity - the real thing: that when preaching, for instance, deals with anything other than how to get to heaven, it is liberal - modernistic: and that when the church addresses itself to the world, it has become dangerously politicized, unfaithful, and perhaps even communistic.

The other side of the divide belongs to the Social Activists. The purpose of Christian faith for these people is to bring about a utopia on earth - the Kingdom of God - by remedying all the ills of mankind - hunger, poverty, pollution, oppression, racism, sexism. Jesus Christ becomes the revolutionary par excellence; the church the breeding ground for social and political ferment. "Relevance" is the "By-word" of the social activists: relevance in terms of societal structures and institutions but not often in terms of the needs of the human spirit.

Now, to be sure, this has been a caricature of the two positions. And yet the division is a real one across the church. It is a conflict we feel in our own hearts and one that many of us pray will be resolved. For the fact is that both positions contain truth: both are able to quote the Bible to prove a point: both can isolate words and acts of Jesus to support their stand. Each needs the other, however, if the end product is to be called Biblical Christianity.

Pietists need to start being honest about the whole prophetic tradition in the Old Testament and to pay a little attention to the very real Biblical concern for peace and justice. Pietists need to look with integrity at the life of Christ who did identify with the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, who was crucified not for preaching personal salvation but for upsetting the politicians. And Social Activists need to stop ignoring the God of the 23rd Psalm: the fatherly God who knows his children by name, who stoops low to share their suffering and bind up the wounds. Activists need to come to terms with the Christ of the New Testament who did set men free from sin and fear.

And it all ought to be driving us back beyond the immediate debate in the church: back to the fundamental question: "What does He Want?" If Christ stands at the door and knocks - the door of our heart - our home - our church - what is it He wants of us?

The Bible gives two answers - or rather one answer with two parts. He wants us - he wants our trust, our faith - and he wants us to do his will in the world. And the two are so close that in the eyes of God they become one.

Moses, for instance: "Go down Moses, to Egypt land - tell ole Pharoh - let my people go!" God came to Moses, out in a pasture near Horeb. God knocked on the door and gave Moses an experience with a burning bush that he'd never forget. But the purpose was not to save his soul, although that happened in the process. God, the account reads, saw the affliction of his people, heard their cry for help, knew their suffering and decided to do something about it: to set them free - to be precise: free in a very political and economic and social sense. And Moses was the one who was called to do it. That sort of thing keeps happening in the Bible. People are saved by God in order to serve. Salvation in the Bible is not confined to a private sense of security but a stance in life that gets people involved with other people, more often than not in sticky and controversial situations.

Leslie Newbigin, a Bishop in the Church of South India, put it in very concise terms: "Peter and Andrew and James and John are not portrayed as mystics seeking the true religion and finding it in the teaching of Jesus. They are rather shown as men picked by a commander for an expedition, a task force rather than a study group or a holy club." Then, addressing us, he says: "The Church has constantly forgotten this. It has listened to the words 'Come Unto Me.' but not listened to the words 'Go - I will be with you.' It has interpreted conversion as if it was simply a turning toward God for purposes of one's own

private inner religious life, instead of seeing conversion as it is in the Bible, a turning toward God for the doing of his will in the secular world." (Honest Religion for Secular Man, pp. 100-101)

Jesus is knocking at the door. He wants us to love him enough, trust him enough, have faith enough in him to do his will in the world. In Laodicea, when John envisioned him knocking at the door he wanted his people to believe in him by taking a stand on an issue that appeared to be purely political. In Moses' case he wanted Moses faith - but also his body.

He wants us to be saved. He calls us to realize and grasp our salvation by serving other people. St. Paul saw that when people in the early Corinthian Church were arguing about who was really saved. He wrote to them: "If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." And a verse from the First Letter of John - "We know that we have passed from death to life when we love the brethren."

The means to our salvation - other people's need? God calling us through the cry for help from a brother? It's an intriguing thought - a devastating thought in light of what is happening to the mission of the United Presbyterian Church. Ordinarily we do our Christian service as a kind of after thought to our churchmanship: we reluctantly pay the price and then we are inclined to feel that it falls into the category of self-sacrifice. But the Bible keeps insisting that the reward of salvation is given as we love - "For we pass from death to life when we love the brethren."

The sad part about it is that young, alive and very perceptive people are rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ because they have seen that much of what goes under the name of Christianity stops with the individual. They've watched the church back away from the life and death issues of our age and they've concluded that this faith is irrelevant. And they're right. More to the point - faith that stops with me isn't Christian faith at all. For the Gospel is the call of Jesus Christ to receive the gift of salvation - and then to live it by serving others in the world.

When that happens there is nothing lukewarm about it. Christian Faith lived in the world is hot, enthusiastic, joyful, urgent. And yet, one has to acknowledge that the 1970's have given birth to an insipid lukewarmness in our culture. So much has happened to us in a decade - assassinations - civil rights - Vietnam - the Great Society - Watergate - that a lot of Americans seem to have lost the capacity to care and to feel. People today, in the words of William Sloane Coffin, are scrambling to become Charter members in "The Association of Life's Bystanders". Right now we'd settle for a little peace and quiet, a better price on beef and a bit of stability on Wall Street.

In a piercing commentary on life in the 70's, Langdon Gilkey observes, "...when there is nothing significant in our lives, existence becomes a treadmill leading nowhere, a mere succession of rote acts: commuting in the subway, opening letters, making out orders, sweeping a floor...and then at the end of the day eating another meal and brushing your teeth..."
(Naming the Whirlwind, p. 347)

We combat the lukewarmness of life, Gilkey suggests, by way of the new Holy Trinity - sex, alcohol and success. But it doesn't work. Life remains empty. Sex becomes a desperate performance, booze a poor crutch and success - in this context there is no success that is successful enough.

Your salvation - your peace - your self-fulfillment - is out there in the form of someone who needs you: someone who needs your love and attention and strength. The world needs that: the world needs the corporate mission of the United Presbyterian Church: this community needs the love of Broad Street Presbyterian Church: and someone needs you.

But most of all we need the salvation that is promised when we love the brethren. You see, in the final analysis, Jesus Christ knocks on the door of our lives and calls us - not really to self-denial; not really to self-sacrifice but to self-fulfillment: to fullness of life, wholeness, completeness. In giving we do receive: in loving we do become the crown of creation: in serving others - on a grand scale, through the world-wide mission agencies of our church - or simply - personally - intimately one to one - we do taste a little of God's eternal kingdom.

That's what he wants. That is the call and the promise. There's a banquet waiting for those who love.

> "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me..."
>
> Amen.

Father, give us ears to hear your call as it comes through the cries of those in need. Give us grace to live and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.